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PROBLEMS OF CITIZENSHIP

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What place does the Negro occupy as a citizen in the American democracy, and what place should he occupy?

Up to the present time, although the status of the Negro has presented the most serious single group of problems that the nation has ever had to meet, his influence as a participant in the rights and responsibilities of government has been almost negligible. He has been an issue but not an actor in politics.

In the antebellum slavery agitation Negroes played no consequential part; they were an inert lump of humanity possessing no power of inner direction; the leaders on both sides of the struggle that centered around the institution of slavery were white men. The Negroes did not even follow poor old John Brown. After the war the Negro continued to be an issue rather than a partaker in politics, and the conflict continued to be between groups of white men. First, the solid South was arrayed against the Northern reconstructionists, and afterwards the old aristocratic party in the South engaged in a long struggle with a rising democratic party which included the poor white element, up to that time politically unimportant. Even in reconstruction times, and I am not forgetting exceptional Negroes like Bruce, Revels, Pinchback and others, the Negro was a partaker in government solely by virtue of the power of the North. As a class the Negroes were not self-directed, but were used by the Northern reconstructionists and certain political Southerners, who took most of the offices and nearly all the pilferings.

And this is not in the least surprising. Emerging from a condition of slavery the Negro had no power of independent action and practically no leaders who knew anything. He was still a slave in everything except name; and yet he was asked to become at once a governing citizen. Even an amendment to the federal constitution could not over night make freemen of slaves; for citizenship is bestowed in vain upon those who have not, in some measure, earned it.

Half a century, however, has wrought profound changes. Beginning in the crude freedmen's schools, and inspired later by the leadership of able men, both white and colored, the Negro has made surprising advances in fifty years. He has developed a real self-consciousness, he has his own body of opinion expressed in his own newspapers, and his leadership is clearly defined and vigorous. There can be no manner of doubt of the remarkable progress of this race of slaves in half a century; and there is reason to believe that the progress will continue. Thousands of Negroes today have earned citizenship.

"I believe I am safe in saying," writes Booker T. Washington, the greatest of Negro leaders, "that nowhere are there 10,000,000 black people who have greater opportunities or are making better progress than the Negroes in America."

In making these assertions, however, I do not wish to imply that no difficult problems remain to be solved. The Negro not only continues to be a hair-trigger issue in at least ten states of the Union, but the very fact that so many are now prepared for citizenship and are pressing forward to use with intelligence the rights conferred upon them by the fifteenth amendment, gives rise to new and very serious problems. The status of the Negro in the democracy still remains unsettled. Thousands of Americans believe earnestly that no Negro, no matter how intelligent, should be allowed to share in the government, and these not only wish to throw down the legal barrier imposed by the fifteenth amendment, but do their best by state legislation, or by artifice at the primaries or at elections, to nullify the legal rights of the Negro. Other thousands of Americans believe that all Negroes, like all white men, should have the full rights of citizenship. And between these two extremes exists every shade of opinion. As for the Negroes themselves, all of them, no matter what diversities of opinion there may be among them as to methods of progress, are pressing steadily forward to become real participants in government; and in Northern cities they have already become an element decidedly to be reckoned with. In certain Northern States like Ohio and Indiana the Negro vote is increasingly important.

In order to answer with intelligence the question proposed at the head of this article it will be well to consider, at the start, some of the fundamental aspects of citizenship, as symbolized by the right to vote.

It will be admitted without argument, I think, that all governments do and of necessity must exercise the right to limit the number of people who are permitted to take part in the weighty responsibilities of the suffrage. Some governments allow only a few men to vote; in an absolute monarchy there is only one voter; other governments as they become more democratic, permit a larger proportion of the people to vote.

Our own government is one of the freest in the world in the matter of suffrage; and yet we bar out, in most states, all women; we bar out Mongolians, no matter how intelligent; we bar out Indians and all foreigners who have not passed through a certain probationary stage and have not acquired a certain small amount of education. We also declare—for an arbitrary limit must be placed somewhere—that no person under twenty-one years may exercise the right to vote, although some boys of eighteen are today as well equipped to pass intelligently upon public questions as many grown men. We even place adult white men on probation until they have resided for a certain length of time, often as much as two years, in the state or town where they wish to cast their ballots. Our registration and ballot laws eliminate hundreds of thousands of voters, and finally we bar out everywhere the defective and criminal classes of our population. We do not realize, sometimes, I think, how limited the franchise really is, even in America. We forget that out of over 90,000,000 people in the United States only 15,000,000 cast their votes for President in 1912—or about one in every six.

Thus the practice of a restricted suffrage is very deeply implanted in our system of government. It is everywhere recognized that even in a democracy lines must be drawn, and that the ballot, the precious instrument of the government, must be hedged about with stringent regulations. The question is, where shall these lines be drawn in order that the best interests, not of any particular class, but of the whole nation shall be served.

Upon this question we, as free citizens, have the absolute right to agree or disagree with the present laws concerning suffrage; and if we want more people brought in as partakers of the government, or some people who are already in, barred out, we have a right to organize, to agitate, to do our best to change the laws. Powerful organizations of women are now agitating for the right to vote; there is an organization which demands the suffrage for Chinese and

Japanese who wish to become citizens. It is even conceivable that a society might be founded to lower the age-limit from twenty-one to nineteen years, thereby endowing a large number of young men with the privileges, and therefore the educational responsibilities, of political power. On the other hand, many people, chiefly in our Southern States, earnestly believe that the right of the Negro to vote should be curtailed, or even abolished.

Thus we disagree, and government is the resultant of all these diverse views and forces. No one can say dogmatically how far democracy should go in distributing the enormously important powers of active government. Democracy is not a dogma; it is not even a dogma of free suffrage. Democracy is a life, a spirit, a growth. The primal necessity of any sort of government, democratic or otherwise, whether it be more unjust or less unjust toward special groups of its citizens, is to exist, to be a going concern, to maintain upon the whole a stable administration of affairs. If a democracy cannot provide such stability, then the people go back to some form of oligarchy. Having secured a fair measure of stability, a democracy proceeds with caution toward the extension of the suffrage to more and more people—trying foreigners, trying women, trying Negroes.

And no one can prophesy how far a democracy will ultimately go in the matter of suffrage. We know only the tendency. We know that in the beginning, even in America, the right to vote was a very limited matter. In the early years in New England, only church members voted; then the franchise was extended to include property-owners, then it was enlarged to include all white male adults (with certain restrictions), then to include Negroes, then in several Western States, to include women.

Thus the line has been constantly advancing, but with many fluctuations, eddies, and back-currents, like any other stream of progress. At the same time the fundamental principles which underlie popular government, and especially the whole matter of popular suffrage, are much in the public mind. The tendency of government throughout the entire civilized world is strongly in the direction of placing more and more power in the hands of a larger proportion of the people.

In our own country we are enacting a remarkable group of laws providing for direct primaries in the nominations of public

officials, for direct election of United States senators and for direct legislation by means of the initiative and referendum, and we are even going to the point in many cities and states of permitting the people to recall an elected official who is unsatisfactory. The principle of local option, which is nothing but that of direct government by the people, is being widely accepted. All these changes affect, fundamentally, the historic structure of our government, making it less representative and more democratic.

Still more important and far-reaching in its significance is the tendency of our government, especially our cities and our federal government, to regulate or to appropriate business enterprises formerly left wholly in private hands. More and more private business is becoming public business.

Now, then, as the weight of responsibility upon the popular vote is increased, it becomes more and more important that the ballot should be jealously guarded and honestly exercised. In the last few years, therefore, a series of extraordinary new precautions have been adopted: the Australian ballot, more stringent registration systems, the stricter enforcement of naturalization laws to prevent the voting of crowds of unprepared foreigners, and the imposition by several states, rightly or wrongly, of educational or property tests. It becomes a more and more serious matter every year to be an American citizen, more of an honor, more of a duty.

At the close of the Civil War, in a time of intense idealistic emotion, some three-quarters of a million of Negroes, the mass of them densely ignorant and just out of slavery, with the iron of slavery still in their souls, were suddenly given the political rights of free citizens. A great many people, and not in the South alone, thought then, and still think, that it was a mistake to bestow the high powers and privileges of a wholly unrestricted ballot—a ballot which is the symbol of intelligent self-government—upon the Negro. Other people, of whom I am one, believe that it was an unescapable concomitant of the revolution; it was itself a revolution, not a growth, and like every other revolution it had its fearful reaction. Revolutions, indeed, change names but they do not at once change human relationships. Mankind is reconstructed not by proclamations, or legislation, or military occupation, but by time, growth, religion, thought. At that time, then, the nation drove down the stakes of its idealism in government far beyond the point which it was able

to reach in the humdrum activities of everyday existence. A reaction was inevitable; it was inevitable and perfectly natural that there should be a widespread questioning as to whether all Negroes, or indeed any Negroes, should properly be admitted to full political fellowship. That questioning continues to this day.

Now, the essential principle established by this fifteenth amendment to the Constitution was not that all Negroes should necessarily be given an unrestricted ballot; but that the right to vote should not be denied or abridged "on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude." This amendment wiped out the color line in politics so far as any written law could possibly do it.

Let me here express my profound conviction that the principle of political equality then laid down is a sound, valid, and absolutely essential principle of any free government; that the restriction upon the ballot, when necessary, should be made to apply equally to white and colored citizens, and that the fifteenth amendment ought not to be repealed. Moreover, I am convinced that the principle of political equality is more firmly established today than it was forty years ago, when it had only Northern bayonets behind it. For now, however short the practice falls of reaching the legal standard, the principle is woven into the warp and woof of Southern life and Southern legislation. Not a few Southern white leaders of thought are today convinced, not forced believers in the principle, and that is a great omen.

Limitations have come about, it is true, and were to be expected as the back-currents of the revolution. Laws providing for educational or property qualifications as a prerequisite to the exercise of suffrage have been passed in all the Southern States, and have operated to exclude from the ballot large numbers of both white and colored citizens, who, on account of ignorance or poverty, are unable to meet the tests. These provisions, whatever the opinion entertained as to the wisdom of such laws, are well within the principle laid down by the fifteenth amendment. But several Southern States have gone a step farther, and have passed the so-called "grandfather laws," the effect of which is to exempt certain ignorant white men from the necessity of meeting the educational and property tests. Some of these unfair "grandfather laws" have now expired by limitation in the states adopting them and some are in process of being tested in the courts.

Let me, then, lay down this general proposition:

Nowhere in the South today is the Negro cut off legally, as a Negro, from the ballot. Legally, today, any Negro who can meet the comparatively slight requirements as to education, or property, or both, can cast his ballot on a basis of equality with the white man. I have emphasized the word legally, for I know the practical difficulties which confront the Negro voter in many parts of the South. In the enforcement of the law, the legislative ideal is still pegged out far beyond the actual performance.

Now, then, if we are interested in the problem of democracy, we have two courses open to us. We may think the laws are unjust to the Negro, and incidentally to the poor white man as well. If we do we have a perfect right to agitate for a change, and we can do much to disclose, without heat, the actual facts regarding the complicated and vexatious legislative situation in the South, as regards the suffrage. Every change in the legislation upon this subject should, indeed, be jealously watched that the principle of political equality between the races be not legally curtailed. The doctrine laid down in the fifteenth amendment must, at any hazard, be maintained.

But personally, and I am here voicing a profound conviction, I think our emphasis at present should be laid upon the practical rather than upon the legal aspect of the problem. I think we should take advantage of the widely prevalent feeling in the South that the question of suffrage has been settled, legally, for some time to come; of the desire on the part of many Southern people, both white and colored, to turn aside from the discussion of the political status of the Negro. In short, let us for the time being accept the laws as they are, and build upward from that point. Let us turn our attention to the practical task of finding out why it is that the laws we already have are not enforced, and how best to secure an honest vote for every Negro and equally for every "poor white" man, (and there are thousands of him) who is able to meet the requirements, but who for one reason or another does not or cannot exercise his rights.

Taking up this side of the question we shall discover two entirely distinct difficulties:

First, we shall find many Negroes, and indeed hundreds of thousands of white men as well, who might vote, but who through

ignorance, or the inability or unwillingness to pay poll taxes, or from mere lack of interest, disfranchise themselves.

The second difficulty is peculiar to the Negro. It consists in open or concealed intimidation on the part of the white men who control the election machinery. In many places in the South today no Negro, no matter how well qualified, would dare to present himself for registration. When he does he is often rejected for some trivial or illegal reason.

Thus we have to meet a vast amount of apathy and ignorance and poverty on the one hand, and the threat of intimidation on the other.

First of all, for it is the chief injustice as between white and colored men that we have to deal—an injustice which the law already makes punishable—how shall we meet the matter of intimidation? As I have said already the door of the suffrage is everywhere legally open to the Negro, but a certain sort of Southerner bars the passageway. He stands there and, law or no law, keeps out many Negroes who might vote, and he represents in most parts of the South the prevailing public opinion.

Shall we meet this situation by force? What force is available? Shall the North go down and fight the South? But the North today has no feeling but friendship for the South. More than that, and I say it with all seriousness, because it represents what I have heard wherever I have gone in the North to make inquiries regarding the Negro problem, the North, wrongly or rightly, is today more than half convinced that the South is right in imposing some measure of limitation upon the franchise. There is now, in short, no disposition anywhere in the North to interfere in the internal affairs of the South—not even with the force of public opinion.

What other force, then, is to be invoked? Shall the Negro revolt? Shall he migrate? The very asking of these questions suggests the inevitable reply.

We might as well, here and now, dismiss the idea of force, express or implied. There are times of last resort which call for force (and the time may come in the future when force will again have to be applied to cure injustice); but this plainly is not such a time.

What other alternatives are there?

Accepting the laws as they are, then, there are two methods of procedure, neither sensational, nor exciting.

The underlying causes of the trouble in the country being plainly ignorance and prejudice, we must meet ignorance and prejudice with their antidotes: education and association.

Every effort should be made to extend free education both among Negroes and white people. A great extension of education is now going forward in the South. The Negro is not by any means getting his full share (indeed he is getting shamefully less than his share), but as certainly as sunshine makes things grow, education in the South will produce tolerance. That there is already such a growing tolerance no one who has talked with the leading white men of the South can doubt. The old fire-eating, Negro-baiting leaders of the Tillman-Vardaman type are passing away: a far better and broader group is coming into power.

In his last book Mr. Edgar Gardner Murphy, of Alabama, expresses this new point of view when he says:

There is no question here as to the unrestricted admission (to the ballot) of the great masses of our ignorant and semi-ignorant blacks. I know no advocate of such an admission. But the question is as to whether the individuals of the race, upon conditions of restriction legally imposed and fairly administered, shall be admitted to an adequate and increasing representation in the electorate. And as that question is more seriously and more generally considered many of the leading publicists of the South, I am glad to say, are quietly resolved that the answer shall be in the affirmative.

From an able Southern white man, a resident of New Orleans, I received only recently a letter containing these words:

"I believe we have reached the bottom, and a sort of quiescent period. I think it most likely that from now on there will be a gradual increase in the Negro vote. And I honestly believe that the less said about it, the surer the increase will be."

Education, and by education I mean education of all sorts, industrial, professional, classical, in accordance with each man's talents will not only produce breadth and tolerance, but it will help to cure the apathy which now keeps so many thousands of both white men and Negroes from the polls: for it will show them that it is necessary for every man to exercise all the political rights within his reach. For if he fails voluntarily to take advantage of the rights he already has, how shall he acquire more rights?

As ignorance must be met by education, so prejudice must be met with its antidote, which is association. Democracy does not

consist in mere voting, but in association, the spirit of common effort, of which the ballot is a visible expression. When we come to know one another we soon find that the points of likeness are much more numerous than the points of difference. And this human association for the common good, which is democracy, is difficult to bring about anywhere, whether among different classes of white people, or between white people and Negroes.

After the Atlanta riot I attended a number of conferences between leading white men and leading colored men. It is true these meetings bore evidence of awkwardness and embarrassment, for they were among the first of that sort to take place in the South, but they were none the less valuable. A white man told me after one of these meetings: "I did not know there were any such sensible Negroes in the South." And a Negro told me that it was the first time in his life that he had ever heard a Southern white man reason in a friendly manner with a Negro concerning their common difficulties.

More and more these associations of white and colored men, at certain points of contact, must and will come about. Already, in connection with various educational and business projects in the South, white men and colored men meet on common grounds, and the way has been opened to a wider mutual understanding. And it is common enough now, where it was unheard of a few years ago, for both white men and Negroes to speak from the same platform in the South. I have attended a number of such meetings. Thus slowly, awkwardly at first—for two centuries of prejudice are not easily overcome—the white man and Negro are coming to know each other, not as master and servant, but as co-workers. These things cannot be forced.

One reason why the white man and the Negro have not got together more rapidly in the South than they have, is because they have tried always to meet at the sorest points. When sensible people, who must live together whether or no, find that there are points at which they cannot agree, it is the part of wisdom to avoid those points, and to meet upon other and common interests. Upon no other terms, indeed, can a democracy exist, for in no imaginable future state will individuals cease to disagree with one another upon something less than half of all the problems of life.

"Here we all live together in a great country," say the apostles

of this view, "let us all get together and develop it. Let the Negro do his best to educate himself, to own his own land, and to buy and sell with the white people in the fairest possible way "

Now, buying and selling, land ownership and common material pursuits may not be the highest points of contact between man and man, but they are real points, and they help to give men an idea of the worth of their fellows, white or black. How many times, in the South, I have heard a white man speak in high admiration for some Negro farmer who had been successful, or of some Negro blacksmith who was a worthy citizen, or some Negro doctor who was a leader of his race.

It is curious once a man (any man, white or black) learns to do his job well how he finds himself in a democratic relationship with other men. I remember asking a prominent white citizen of a town in central Georgia if he knew anything about Tuskegee. He said:

Yes; I had rather a curious experience last fall. I was building a hotel and couldn't get anyone to do the plastering as I wanted it done. One day I saw two Negro plasterers at work in a new house that a friend of mine was building. I watched them for an hour. They seemed to know their trade. I invited them to come over and see me. They came, took the contract for my work, hired a white man to carry mortar at a dollar a day, and when they got through it was the best job of plastering in town. I found that they had learned their trade at Tuskegee. They averaged four dollars a day each in wages. We tried to get them to locate in our town, but they went back to school.

Out of such crude points of contact will grow an ever finer and finer spirit of association and of common and friendly knowledge. And that will lead inevitably to an extension upon the soundest possible basis of Negro franchise. I know cases where white men have urged intelligent Negroes to cast their ballots, and have stood sponsor for them out of genuine respect. Today, Negroes who vote in the South are as a class, men of substance and intelligence, fully equal to the tasks of citizenship.

Thus I have confidence not only in the sense of the white man in the South but in the innate capability of the Negro—and that once these two really come to know each other, not at sore points of contact, nor as mere master and servant, but as workers for a common country, the question of suffrage will gradually solve itself in the interest of true democracy.

Another influence also will tend to change the status of the Negro as a voter. That is the pending break-up of the political solidarity of the South. All the signs point to a political re-alignment upon new issues in this country, both South and North. Old party names may even pass away. And that break-up, with the attendant struggle for votes, is certain to bring into politics thousands of Negroes and white men now disfranchised. The result of a real division on live issues has been shown in many local contests in the South, as in the fight against the saloons, when every qualified Negro voter, and every Negro who could qualify, was eagerly pushed forward by one side or the other. With such a division on new issues the Negro will tend to exercise more and more political power, dividing not on the color line, but on the principles at stake. Still another influence which is helping to solve the problem is the wider diffusion of Negroes throughout the country. The proportion of Negroes to the whites in most of the Southern States is decreasing, thereby relieving the fear of Negro domination, whereas Negroes are increasing largely in Northern communities, where they take their place in politics not as an indigestible mass, but divide along party lines even more readily than some of the foreign-American groups in our population. A study of the Negro vote in November, 1912, would show that many Negroes broke their historic allegiance with the Republican party and voted for Roosevelt, while some even cast their votes for Wilson; and in local elections the division is still more marked.

Thus in spite of the difficulties which now confront the Negro, I cannot help looking upon the situation with a spirit of optimism. I think sometimes we are tempted to set a higher value upon the ritual of a belief than upon the spirit which underlies it. The ballot is not democracy; it is merely the symbol or ritual of democracy, and it may be full of passionate social significance, or it may be a mere empty and dangerous formalism. What we should look to, then, primarily, is not the shadow, but the substance of democracy in this country. Nor must we look for results too swiftly; our progress toward democracy is slow of growth and needs to be cultivated with patience and watered with faith.